

Sword and Spinner: Reaper-King

[FX: A small stringed instrument picks its way through notes.]

Chloe, as the intro: Sword and Spinner, Episode Three: Reaper-king.

[FX: Cicadas fade in, interspersed, occasionally, by the faint sound of crows.]

“Please.”

The words were said by a little girl whose dark hair had been cut raggedy to a boy’s length. She dressed in too-large trousers held up by a belt and a gray knitted vest, almost too small, now, that seemed to have been made some far moon ago with the utmost care. She didn’t dare to touch Remus, hovering before him like a specter, and her size – ghosts and gods and stars, she couldn’t have been more than seven – meant that he nearly missed her in the crowd.

Almost. All of these godsforsaken Rhyseans never knew how to be *quiet*, but he was used to the way his people spoke. He didn’t miss her words.

Because it wasn’t a Rhysean *please*, pers, always said in a breathy way that made it too close to seduction for Remus’s comfort. It was an Illinkan *please – favore* – and that, more than anything, was enough to stop them dead in their tracks.

“Please,” she said again, Illnikan *please, “favore*. Reaper-king, I need your help.”

And that – that – was enough to send him to one knee. Reeling. His old name. *His old name* – title – how had she known? She wasn’t more than seven, more than eight, and he’d

been gone that long at least. Time blurred. He'd spent too much of his first – year? Two? – drunk and stumbling, drunk and trying to forget, and that didn't make tracking time an easy endeavor.

Reaper-king. But at least they were kneeling in front of her, now, and she took that as an invitation. Lila paraded on, caught up in the grand celebration, but Remus was caught – here – in this moment.

He had never been anywhere but here. He had never been anyone but this. He was nineteen years old again, *Reaper-king*, himself but greater and stronger and *political* – *ha*, Remus, political. They'd been a force to reckon with. Never stupid enough to turn against the man he'd help put onto the throne when he was an even younger and stupider teenager – no, of course not – but that didn't mean there wouldn't have been supporters for him, if he'd decided to try. That didn't mean that kings – especially kings who'd won their thrones in wars – were sensible creatures – it made them anything *but* – but it hadn't taken Remus long to become too good at hunting monsters without a war to occupy him that he became a threat. Nineteen and stupid, nineteen and glory-struck. *Awesome*, in the old way, the way that meant *inspires fear*.

To some. To the monsters in the dark. Of course, sometimes, the powerful were the monsters.

Remus forced himself to concentrate on the girl – it was easy, letting their ears tune into his own language. They'd forgotten what it sounded like, to listen to words pour out in an accent unstilted by pressing Rhysean. Lila kept them from forgetting this – *home* – but she was no skilled linguist. They'd forgotten just how much that was true.

“My father is dead but he wakes when there are storms and my mother is crazy my mother is crazy, my brother tries to stop her, we tie my father to a boat when the storms come and we pray that our tower holds that the tide does not wash him to shore that he does not wake up when we tie the ropes. I am scared and she grows angrier by the –”

“Remus?” Lila had finally realized he was gone. He managed to tear his gaze from the child before him, dragged that gaze up, up to Lila, where she stood with one hand cradling her lyre with more care than she ever had the myriad of babies she’d kissed. The other hand was cocked on her hip. “Why did you stop? They’re throwing a feast.” Here she wiggled her eyebrows and let her mouth fall into a stylized *o*, not *shock* so much as *shock, practiced in a still pond*. There was still too much smugness in it to be genuine. “Can we *go*? There’s a girl, you know, that was giving me moon eyes. I’m sure it wouldn’t take much to –”

“I can’t go back to Illikna,” he said to the child, cutting Lila off. “I’ll be killed. I don’t know how you crossed the sea, but go home. Find someone else to be your reaper.”

Ghosts and gods and stars. It hurt him to speak in his own language. To turn away from a chance that would allow him to speak more, and more, and more. His bag of sand was almost empty – he was hoarding it, now, the sprinkling that had survived being slashed by that fucking *dog* those months ago. But he couldn’t convince himself to give up the idea of *home*. No matter how much better it would have been for him.

Her brow furrowed. “I don’t live in the Far Shore. I live in Rhysea.”

He stiffened at that. *The Far Shore*. No one from Illikna called it that, called this place of dirt and longing for old magic by the name of its people instead of their own. The two Rhysean words tumbling out around the mix of Illiknan – *Far Shore* – was almost worse than the separation.

It didn't make sense. She knew the stories of him (*of the reaper-king*, Remus reminded himself, *that's not you anymore*) and yet called Illikna *The Far Shore* instead. She spoke to him in his own language and claimed to be from here. She had a mad mother – maybe – and a dead father – maybe – unless, unless, she was sent by someone to tug at his heartstrings, to lead him into a trap to be killed.

But if so, she wouldn't have called it *The Far Shore*.

That left one option – she was, like him, a refugee. Her family, like him, for some reason or another, had been driven out by the Mad King or his friend, the king that came after.

He couldn't resist a sob story. He collected them. He was one of them. Lila was one of them.

"We're not going," Remus said, this time to Lila in Rhysean. Her mouth fell open – this time, *shock*, *genuine*.

"What?" She squawked. "Remus, we just killed the *cannibal* that's been *picking off people in this town for months*. Can we not stop to celebrate for a *night*?"

"No," he said, and stood. Without thinking, he offered the little girl his hand, and she took it without hesitation. "We have another job."

Shock melted into something akin to *disgust* as Lila took in the girl, their clasped hands, and Remus's free hand on the hilt of his short sword.

"Is that a *child*?" She asked petulantly, and this time there was no *akin to* for the disgust to glance off of. "Remus, we've talked about this. No strays. *Especially* no strays that aren't house trained."

“Aw,” Remus said. “Don’t put yourself out in the street like that.” She made a face. They ignored it and squeezed the girl’s hand as she tugged on his thumb.. “Come on. We’ll say our goodbyes; take some food for the road.”

To the little girl, in Illiknan – “How far from here do you live?”

“I left last morning and slept in a barn. Then I walked here.”

“And you live on –”

“This shore.”

This shore. How had he wandered so close to the coast without realizing? Was it longing, or chance, or love? He supposed longing and love were much the same.

“An hour.” Lila crossed her arms. “I get an hour, and then we can go.”

Remus groaned. “Thirty minutes.”

“Forty-five,” Lila said. “Final offer, or take your newfound *child* and go without me.”

“Daughter,” Remus corrected, and it was the Illiknan word. Rhysea didn’t have a word for *daughter*, just *child*, as Lila had said. He still separated the two in his head.

Lila raised her eyebrows in a way that told Remus they were many things, but good at hiding their nostalgia was not one of them. They relented rather than let her keep harping on the subject.

“An hour,” he conceded. An hour was enough to get Lila drunk and happy enough to forget he’d said anything at all.

She brightened, and swept into a bow. “An hour.”

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[The outro, an instrumental version of Sword and Spinner, begins to play]

Abigail: Sword and Spinner is written and edited by me, Abigail Eliza.

Chloe: The music was written, sung, and edited by me, Chloe Peterson.

Abigail: The voice of Remus was Abigail Eliza.

Chloe: And the voice of Lila was Chloe Peterson.

Abigail: If you'd like to hear more about Sword and Spinner or other stories in Rhysea, you can check us out on twitter, instagram, or tumblr @Backagainpodcast or @Abigailelizawrites on Tik Tok.

Chloe: If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are.

Abigail: There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. I hope you have a wonderful day.